

Message Text

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 00881 01 OF 02 041636Z

43

ACTION NEA-10

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 0881

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PFOR, IS, LE, JO, US, SY, EG

SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER PERES' COMMENTS ON SYRIAN AND LEBANESE

SITUATION AND NEGOTIATIONS WITH JORDAN

BEGIN UNCLASSIFIED:

BEGIN SUMMARY: IN FEBRUARY 3 RADIO INTERVIEW DEFENSE
MINISTER PERES DEFENDED GOI DECISION NOT TO INTERVENE IN
LEBANESE CIVIL WAR: BUT STRESSED THAT CONTINUING NON-
INTERVENTION WOULD DEPEND ON FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS. SYRIAN
ACTIONS COULD STILL PROVOKE ISRAELI INTERVENTION OR EVEN
POSSIBILITY OF WAR. HE CHARACTERIZED JORDAN AS NOT YET
READY TO NEGOTIATE UNTIL SHE RECEIVES ARAB MANDATE AND
STRESSED THAT PRESENT ACCOMMODATION MAY BE PREFERABLE TO
REOPENING QUESTIONS OF NEW ARRANGEMENTS. HE REFUSED TO
COMMENT ON WASHINGTON REPORT THAT PRIME MINISTER RABIN
HAD CRITICIZED ISRAEL'S MILITARY REQUEST LIST, BUT SAID
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 00881 01 OF 02 041636Z

THAT HE WOULD PREFER FASTER DELIVERY FROM U.S. AND POINTED

TO ACCELERATED FLOW OF ARMS TO ARABS. HE ALSO STRESSED THAT RUSSIA'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ISRAEL WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY HOSTILE AND UNBALANCED. HOWEVER, HE BELIEVED THAT USSR WOULD CONTINUE TO MOVE CAUTIOUSLY IN MIDDLE EAST CONSIDERING THAT SHE HAD BEEN BURNT BEFORE DURING HER SEVERAL EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH BASES IN MIDDLE EAST. BOTH MINISTER AND ARMY COMMANDERS AT LEBANESE FRONTIER POINTED OUT TO REPORTERS THAT SO FAR ALL WAS QUITE ON NORTHERN FRONT AND THAT LEBANESE ARMY HAD RESUMED GUARDING FRONTIER. END SUMMARY

1. INTERVENTION IN LEBANON SO FAR NOT JUSTIFIED. IN FEBRUARY 3 INTERVIEW ON IDF RADIO (FULL TEXT TRANSMITTED BY FBIS) DEFENSE MINISTER PERES REJECTED CRITICISM THAT GOVERNMENT IN ORDER TO JUSTIFY NON-INTERVENTION WAS SEEKING TO MINIMIZE PLA INVASION OF LEBANON AND SYRIAN ATTEMPT TO SEIZE CONTROL OF COUNTRY. HE EXPLAINED THAT "NOT EVERY CHANGE IN ARAB COUNTRIES WARRANTED MILITARY INTERVENTION ON OUR PART...WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THREE POSSIBILITIES REGARDING WHICH WE HAVE ADOPTED EXPLICIT POSITIONS: -) SHOULD THERE BE CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON, ISRAEL MUST AVOID INTERVENTION, B) SHOULD THE SYRIAN ARMY INVADE LEBANON WE SHALL HAVE TO ADOPT DEFENSIVE MEASURES, C) ADDITIONALLY THERE ARE VARIATIONS OF THESE THEMES, SUCH AS POSSIBLE TERRORIST SEIZURE OF CONTROL OVER SOUTHERN LEBANON THREATENING THE SECURITY OF OUR NORTHERN BORDER... IN THAT EVENT WE WOULD ADOPT APPROPRIATE MEASURES (BUT),.... TO ENTER LEBANON AND START LOOKING FOR ONE OR ANOTHER (PLA) BATTALION WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO EXPLAIN EXACTLY OUR OBJECTIVE IS VERY DIFFICULT. I WISH TO ADD TWO MORE REMARKS: FIRST THAT THE LEBANESE ARMY HAS RETURNED TO SOUTHER LEBANON. IT USED TO HAVE THREE BATTALIONS NOW IT HAS ONLY TWO; ONE BATTALION HAVING BEEN TRANSFERRED TO BEIRUT. THE OTHER THING IS THAT AT LEAST ONE BATTALION OF THE PLA... BETWEEN 300-400 MEN-- HAS BEEN RETURNED TO SYRIA. FINALLY, I AM NOT SURE THAT THE ISSUE (OF INTERVENTION) IS ALREADY OVER."

2. PLA ROLE AND SYRIA. WITH REGARD TO THE ROLE OF THE PLA IN LABANON AND THE POSSIBILITY OF INTERNAL STABILIZATION, PERES ANSWERED: "I ESTIMATE THAT A MODUS VIVENDI BETWEEN THE WARRING PARTIES HAS NOT YET BEEN FOUND. SYRIA HAS A LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 TEL AV 00881 01 OF 02 041636Z

CHOICE: EITHER TO TAKE THE MOSLEM SIDE AND TO AROUSE THE CHRISTIANS OR TO TRY AND TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION BOTH SIDES AND THEN TO DEAL WITH THE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS OF BOTH RIVALS...I THINK THE SYRIANS THEMSELVES ARE NOT YET OVER THE BRIDGE. FURTHERMORE, THERE IS THE HATE CAUSED AS A RESULT OF DESTRUCTION. HASSANIN HAYKAL...CLAIMS THAT IN LAST TEN MONTHS MORE PEOPLE WERE KILLED IN LABANON THAN IN ALL THE ARAB ARMIES DURING THE YOM KIPPUR WAR...MOREOVER, MORE

THAT 200-250 THOUSAND PEOPLE LEFT LEBANON. EVERYTHING OVER THERE IS SHATTERED AND BOILING AND EACH SIDE IS ASSEMBLING STOCKS OF ARMS, PREPARING AND TRAINING (FOR RESUMPTION OF HOSTILITIES), AND THE SYRIAN COMPROMISE, EVEN IF ACCEPTED IN PRINCIPLE, HAS NOT YET BEEN...FINALIZED. THEREFORE, THE SITUATION IS STILL OPEN AND I DON'T KNOW YET HOW IT WILL END."

3. SYRIA SEEKS ARAB ALLIANCE; AND JORDAN NOT YET READY TO ACT ALONE. WITH REGARD TO THE PROSPCTS FOR 1976 AND A QUESTION WHETHER THE MINISTER SHARED RABIN'S VIEW THAT SYRIA MAY THRATHEN WAR WHEN UNDOF MANDATE EXPIRES IN MAY, PERES SAID THAT THIS WAS POSSIBLE. "SYRIA WILL BE IN A DILEMMA IN MAY. IF SHE IS READY FOR WAR...THE ENTIRE YEAR WIL BE FRAUGHT WITH DANGER. IT IS, OF COURSE, TO BE DOUBTED WHETHER SYRIA WILL GO TO WAR ALONE. IN MY ESTIMATE THE SYRIANS ARE TRYING TO PROMOTE A COALITION THAT WOULD INCLUDE AT LEAST SYRIA/JORDAN/IRAQ AND LEBANON. IN ADDITION SHE IS NOW BUSY IN LEBANON PROPER. SHE MAY ALSO SEEK MEANS TO DRAG EGYPT INTO WAR. AS TO POLITICAL STALEMATE ONE HAS TO LOOK IN THREE DIRECTIONS. I THINK THERE IS USTIFICATION FOR CONTINUING AGREEMENTS WITHEGYPT BUT I DOUBT IF EGYPT, FOR REASONS OF ITS OWN, IS INTERESTED IN RESUMPTION OF AGREEMNTS IN 1976. IT HAS ENOUGH TO DO WITH WHAT IT HAS RECEIVED SO FAR. JORDAN HAS NOT YET RECEIVED A MANDATE FROM THE ARAB WORLD FOR CONDUCTING NEGOTIATIONS ON JUDEA AND SAMARIA. UNTIL IT RECEIVES SUCH A MANDATE I DOUBT THAT IT WOULD NEGOTIATE ON ITS OWN INITIATIVE. AS FOR THE SYRIANS, I THINK THEY ARE STILL CAPABLE OF SURPRISE. ON THE WHOLE, THE TWO OR THREE MOVES WHICH SYRIA HAS MADE HAVE NOT PRODUCED THE RESULTS WHICH SHE HAD HOPED FOR. THE MOVE IN THE UN ENDED WITH AN AMERICAN VETO; THE PENETRATION INTO LEBANON HS NOT YET ENDED AND RAISES (CONTINUING) LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 04 TEL AV 00881 01 OF 02 041636Z

PROBLEMS; AND HER RELATIONS WITH THE ARAB COUNTRIES, ALTHOUGH IMPROVED...REMAINS FAR FROM CONSTITUTING A REAL COALITION."

4. SYRIAN MILITARY AND POLITICAL ROLE. REGARDING THE POSSIBILITY OF SYRIAN POLITICAL AND MILITARY SURPRISES, THE MINISTER THOUGHT THAT THEY WERE POSSIBLE..." I HAVE THE FEELING THAT THE RUSSIANS ARE NOT ALTOGETHER RELYING ON THE SYRIANS, EVEN THOUGH THEY ARE GIVING THEM ARMS... THEY DO NOT TRUST THEM TO GO POLITICALLY ARM-IN-ARM WITH THE SOVIET UNION. THE RUSSIANS HAD THEIR FINGERS BURNED IN EGYPT AND ARE VERY LEERY OF THE TEPID WATERS OF SYRIA... AS LONG AS ASSAD WAS DEVISING HIS OWN TACTICS, NO POSSIBILITY COULD BE RULED OUT." THE MINISTER ASSURED QUESTIONERS THAT IN THE COURSE OF ISRAEL'S PREPARATIONS

AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING THE POSSIBILITY OF SURPRISES WAS FULLY TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT. ASKED WHETHER ANYTHING ADVERSE COULD COME FROM THE PLA BATTALION UNDER SYRIAN COMMAND ON THE SOUTHERN BORDER AND WHETHER THE INTERNAL SITUATION IN LEBANON AND THE THREAT OF TERRORIST ACTIVITIES ON THE NORTHERN BORDER COULD BE LINED, PERES EXPLAINED: "IF MY ESTIMATE IS CORRECT, THERE ARE NOW IN LEBANON SOME FOUR PLA BATTALIONS...THIS MEANS BETWEEN 1,500 AND 2,000 MEN. WE HAVE NO EVIDENCE THAT THEY HAVE TANKS..."

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PAGE 01 TEL AV 00881 02 OF 02 041701Z

43

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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 2 OF 2 TEL AVIV 0881

AND IT IS TO BE DOUBTED IF THEY HAVE HEAVY ARTILLERY. THEY, OF COURSE, SUPPLEMENT A FORCE OF SOME 10,000 'TERRORISTS.' THEY HAVE THEIR HANDS FULL, HAVING TO GUARD REFUGEES AND TO CONFRONT OTHER LEBANESE FORCES. ALTHOUGH THIS FORCE IS SUBSTANTIAL, IT IS NOT YET CRUCIAL. NATURALLY, WHAT IS HAPPENING IN LEBANON IS TAKING UP CONSIDERABLE PART OF FATAH'S ENERGY AND WITHIN FATAH ITSELF THERE ARE QUITE A NUMBER OF DISPUTES. FOR THE

TIME BEING THEIR ACTIVITY ON THE BORDER HAS NOT
INCREASED ALTHOUGH WE ARE TAKING SUCH A POSSIBILITY INTO
ACCOUNT. SHOULD IT HAPPEN, WE SHALL TAKE EVERY MEASURE...
TO FOIL IT."

5. ISRAEL'S RELATIONS WITH THE ARAB COUNTRIES. COMMENTING
ON ISRAEL'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE ARAB WORLD, PERES SAID
THE PRESENT UNWRITTEN AGREEMENT WITH JORDAN, WHICH INCLUDES
OPEN BRIDGES, ECONOMIC CONTACT AND "GOOD MANNERS IN POLITICAL
STATEMENTS," WAS PREFERABLE TO A NEGOTIATED INTERIM SETTLEMENT.
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PAGE 02 TEL AV 00881 02 OF 02 041701Z

"IF WE CHANGE THE CURRENT SITUATION FOR DIPLOMATIC
HAGGLING FOR ANOTHER ARRANGEMENT, WE MIGHT LOSE WHAT WE
ALREADY HAVE IN HAND," THE MINISTER SAID.

6. ISRAEL'S READINESS TO RECEIVE REFUGEES FROM THE FIGHTING
IN LEBANON HAD COME ABOUT AFTER AN ENTIRE LEBANESE VILLAGE
HAD REQUESTED IT, PERES SAID. THE PALESTINIAN FORCE THAT
HAD ENTERED LEBANON NUMBERED BETWEEN 1,500 AND 2,000 MEN, IN
FOUR BATTALIONS, ONE OF WHICH HAS SINCE RETURNED TO SYRIA.
NONE OF THE UNITS WAS EQUIPPED WITH TANKS OR HEAVY ARTILLERY.

7. THE CONTINUED SUPPLY OF WEAPONRY TO EGYPT FROM THREE
TECHNOLOGIES--RUSSIAN, AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN-- CONTRIBUTED TO
HER INCREASINGLY EXTREMIST POSITION, SAID THE MINISTER. IF
THE EGYPTIANS WERE TO BE OFFERED FIGHTER PLANES FROM THE
U.S., ISRAEL WOULD OPPOSE THIS WITH ALL HER STRENGTH. HOWEVER,
PERES SAID THAT ISRAEL HAD NO KNOWLEDGE OF SUCH AN OFFER.

8. ISRAEL AND USSR. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ISRAEL AND RUSSIA HAD
DETERIORATED, ACCORDING TO PERES. THE SOVIETS WERE NOW LESS
INTERESTED IN ISRAEL'S SECURE EXISTENCE THAN THEY HAD BEEN. THIS WAS
REFLECTED IN OFFICIAL RUSSIAN PRONOUNCEMENTS AS
WELL AS IN CLOSER RELATIONS BETWEEN THE SOVIETS AND THE PLO.

9. PRIME MINISTER'S CRITICISM OF WEAPONS PROCUREMENT LIST.
ASKED WHETHER HE WOULD CONSIDER RESIGNING ON PRIME
MINISTER RABIN'S RETURN FROM THE U.S., BECAUSE OF THE
CRITICISM OF HIS MINISTRY'S ARMS ORDERS BY A "SENIOR
SOURCEZ IN MR. RABIN'S PARTY, PERES SAID HE WAS CONVINCED
THAT HIS ACTIONS WOULD STAND UP TO ANY CRITICISM. ACCORDINGLY,
HE SAW NO REASON FOR CONSIDERING RESIGNATION. WHEN THE
PRIME MINISTER RETURNED, "WE SHALL SEE EXACTLY WHO SAID WHAT,"
BUT AT THIS STAGE PERES WOULD TAKE NO STEP THAT WOULD
DISTURB MR. RABIN'S STATE VISIT TO THE U.S.

10. FLOW OF ARMS. COMMENTING FURTHER ON THE STATE OF ARMS SUPPLY,
PERES SAID THAT ISRAEL WOULD PREFER A QUICKER FLOW. SINCE THE YOM
KIPPUR WAR, THE URAB STATES HAD RECEIVED FOUR TO FIVE TANKS AND

FOUR AIRCRAFT FOR EVERY ONE SUPPLIED TO ISRAEL. THE SITUATION LEFT NO ROOM FOR COMPLACENCY, THE MINISTER SAID.

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PAGE 03 TEL AV 00881 02 OF 02 041701Z

11. CUTS IN THE DEFENSE BUDGET HAD BEEN MAINLY IN AREAS SUCH AS CONSTRUCTION AND INDUSTRY, BUT THE STANDARD OF LIVING IN THE IDF AND THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE HAD ALSO FALLEN, PERES SAID. END UNCLASSIFIED. BEGIN LIMITED OFFICIAL USE:

12. COMMENT: HEADLINES, ACCORDED PERES STATEMENTS ABOUT THREAT OF WAR WITH SYRIA DO NOT SEEM TO BE BORNE OUT BY HIS RATHER CAUTIOUS AND BALANCED STATEMENTS ON THIS POSSIBILITY. HIS STATEMENTS , ARE HOWEVER, BOUND TO ADD FUEL TO THE INTERNAL CONTROVERSY WHICH HAS BEEN RAGING SINCE RABIN'S COMMENTS IN THE U.S. WITH THEIR IMPLICIT CRITICISM OF THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE. ALSO, IN PLAYING DOWN THE POSSIBILITY OF A MOVE TOWARD JORDAN HE IS CUTTING ACROSS RABIN'S STATEMENTS IN THE U.S. AS WELL AS THE DECLARATION BY FONMIN ALLON ON FEB. 3 THAT HE SAW THE SOLUTION "THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS WITH JORDAN." AT LEAST PERES HAS DONE HIS BIT IN CONTRIBUTING TO WHAT SHOULD BE A STIMULATING CABINET MEETING ON FEBRUARY 8 AND KNESSET DEBATE ON FEB. 9. END LIMITED OFFICIAL USE.

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